/8 cont./

579 nothing will give him away or betray him, neither his dagger, always kept in a sheath, nor the glitter of his rifle, wrapped in a cover, nor the soft, inaudible steps of his feet outfitted in bast shoes, nor his horse, well-trained for night-riding, nor, finally, his tongue, the hissing sounds of which resemble the rustling of leaves... With bloodshot eyes, his dagger in one hand and his pistol in the other, the mountaineer throws himself into the battle with a frightful whoop, and at this moment he forgets everything but victory... Such are the Abkhaz and their neighbors.

Even now the Abkhaz looks upon thieving as an act of boldness, of heroism, /9/ and almost as much of a necessity as food and drink. All the Abkhaz, from the small to the great, suffer equally from this ailment -- men, women, and children, and the Abkhazian upper class have even made it their regular occupation. Times and circumstances change, generation after [198] generation slowly but steadily introduces new cultural principles into Abkhaz life -- and robbery alone remains the favorite occupation, as though hallowed by the authority of a hoary antiquity...

● 867 As a matter of fact, what is surprising about it? While still a child, the Abkhaz is subjected to the irresistible influence of the circumstances surrounding him and of all possible elemental forces. And as he grows up, he acts according to these external elemental influences or internal moral influences. Now, to what forces is the Abkhaz exposed in his youth, and what moral principles does he derive from the phenomena and facts of nature and the milieu around him?... There he is, as a child, holding in his hand a knife with a handle bigger than he is, pasturing buffalo or goats in the forest or in the mountains, and he observes what goes on before his eyes: here a fox, lying in wait for a careless wild chicken, catches its prey and carries it into the depths of the forest to finish it off; there a half-starved wolf snatches a lamb from the herd, under the eyes of the unwary shepherd -- a boy like himself; and there, farther away, a bird of prey, waiting until the right moment, shoots down like an arrow upon one of the weaker forest-dwellers and, sinking its claws into its body, flies up with its prey and disappears into

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867 the blue skies... and so it is, day after day. These very same examples of unpunished robbery and violence, repeated daily, must leave deep traces in the conscience of the observant young shepherd. Upon his return home, phenomena he has observed in nature are consolidated and, as it were, sanctified in his eyes by the authority of the older members of the family: every day there are discussions and squabbles about the loss or stealing of cattle; on the one hand, he hears words of praise and approval applied to stealing, and, on the other hand, curses addressed to the thief; finally he sees how the housewife, the lawfulness of whose behavior he has never once thought of doubting, very cautiously digs up the buried meat of an animal stolen from the neighbors and cooks it... And when the child, grown wise by
867 observing his mileu and by the successful experiences of his
579 relatives, /10/ matures into a grown youth, his parents and the leading members of the family in general provide him with arms, having given him their blessing beforehand with the words: "Now make your own living, make your fortune by thievery and robbery, the same as all the people your age." Hence, thievery here has not only the status of an example worthy to be followed when the proper occasion presents itself; it is presented as an obligatory modus vivendi, as a dogma, sanctioned by the authority of the parents and of the older members of the family in general.

867 Let us turn our attention to still another circumstance. As
579 is well known, children love fairy tales and all kinds of stories
538 and legends. In the long winter nights, the old men and women tell stories to the Abkhaz children. But the majority of such tales are likewise harmful from the point of view of moral influence, for the contents of these legends, fairy tales, and stories go no further than eulogies of stealing, robbery, and raiding; in them are sung the praises of the daring, determination, and bravery of some "abrag" (abrek = bandit), of his resourcefulness as a thief, his keen-wittedness when in difficulties, his audacity in robbing and seizing another man's property. This may provide a partial explanation of the regrettable phenomenon in the life of the Abkhaz, that even persons who have had a modicum of secondary education

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867 579 immediately upon their return home revert to the practice acquired in childhood -- stealing. This is of course not the fault of the school or of secondary education, but of the traditional views on this "trade," contact with which kills every other way of looking at it, as the lone wheat-stalk is smothered among the weeds that surround it.

579 In his stealing, the Abkhaz is treacherous. The best of friends, to all appearances, do not hesitate to steal from each other, and in Abkhazia it is no rare thing for brother to steal from brother, father from son, or son from father. It is almost proverbial that when an Abkhaz has no one to steal from, he robs himself. There have been instances of an Abkhaz stealing a horse from a neighbor on a dark night, taking it miles and miles away and exchanging it for another, riding back home on this fresh horse the same night, and the next morning, the minute his neighbor raised the alarm, rushing over and being the first to offer his sympathy and joining the chorus of people calling down curses on the thief and dashing off with the others in frenzied pursuit.

685 579 692 The Abkhaz thief will not admit his crime, even /11/ when he could be convicted on the evidence of witnesses. When a robbery case is tried at village meetings, a decision of the judge in favor of the accused is not infrequently influenced by the audacity of the latter's pretexts, by his shameless subterfuges, and by his so-called "talking circles around them." In general at such [537] meetings, any exhibition of sly rhetoric, however shameless, on the part of a notorious thief finds not only attentive listeners but even admirers. "He saved himself by the bravery of his speech," they say in such cases.

And though such "eloquence" on the part of the thief often saves the guilty one from punishment, the victim, understandably, does not believe in his innocence and tries to get back at him at the proper moment for his losses, according to the formula of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

682 At present vengeance for spilled blood is on the wane, but at one time it was one of the most important features of Abkhaz life. The custom of blood-revenge puts the relatives of a person